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ABSTRACT

Individually and in small groups, superior senior high school students in Belmont, Massachusetts, produced multimedia projects illustrating themes or moods through the synchronization of poems, original scripts, drawings, photographs, slides, and music. Projects ranged from a personal photographic interpretation of Delany's poem, "Solace," to interviews with "seeming-derelicts" on the Boston Common. Although the projects involved little creative writing, they allowed students the opportunities to exercise their individuality and initiative in other media. (MF)

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TO ILLUSTRATE A MOOD, CREATIVELY

by MURIEL E. MORRISSEY

Belmont High School
Belmont, Massachusetts

When I fell heir to English 103 at Belmont High School, my feelings of pleasure and satisfaction were mixed with apprehension, no less acute after I had consulted with the brilliant young teacher who had preceded me. She said, "Your students are the best brains of the school; 103 is a prestigious group. You will indubitably have winners or honorable mentions in contests if you enter them. Your greatest problem will be to keep the students from becoming bored, but you'll enjoy them, I'm sure. Good luck!" No guidelines, no textbooks, no requirements!

My first shock came when, instead of the fourteen who had signed up for the course in their junior year, I had twenty-four on the first day of school; all of the new-comers had such persuasive reasons for wanting to take it that I found it impossible to refuse them. An ideal number for this type of class, however, is fourteen or fifteen to allow for more frequent conferences than are possible with a large group.

After a week devoted to discussion of the subject nearest to their hearts—revitalizing the Student Council and the senior class—I assigned an interview with an adult on the subject of student power. The assignment was politely criticized: "What's creative about writing down what somebody tells us?" Because several students hastened to explain "slanted journalism", I did not have to answer. We had a field day discussing political, parental, religious bias as they appear in writing. I mentioned that the choice of one's interviewee demands thought and judgment.

When I read the reports of the interviews, I found that many of the fine minds needed a course in proof-reading, for spelling and sentence errors occurred more than occasionally. I conferred with each student, often commending content and criticizing mechanics. I discovered that gracious acceptance of correction is not characteristic of many of our gifted students.

After the air had cleared, and they had all produced a formal structured essay without serious mechanical or organizational errors, I announced Project One. A short while before this, I had watched a set of slides beautifully synchronized with music and based on a single mood or theme. I suggested that the class, individually, or in groups of two,

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three, or four, should select themes, find a poem, or verses, or write an original script, to illustrate their idea. They were then to amplify it with drawings or photography, and finally synchronize the two media of language and design with a third great mood-maker, music. I asked that no two individuals or groups take the same topic, and that they all submit the names of their subjects within two days. I set two weeks hence for the date of "presentation", and gave them the rest of that first period for consultation and the formation of groups.

I had anticipated that there would be changes in topics and regroupings of students, but I had not foreseen the scope of their endeavors. I began to have requests for extension of time, and the progress reports including such entries as "drove to Cape for two hours photographing", "went to Prudential Tower at 7:00 A.M. for special shot", "spent 3 hours at record shop to hear records with 'crashing,' "and other such indications that the students were spending more time than I had expected to complete and perfect their projects. Finally, after the deadline had been pushed ahead nearly two weeks, the creators were ready and their paraphernalia assembled. There were record players, movie and slide projectors, and, of course, the silver screen. Some were school property; some were borrowed from home or neighbors; but amazingly, all functioned upon command.

I shall describe a few of the outstanding presentations, each of which had required at least twenty-five hours outside of school time, as well as expenditures of up to ten dollars for films and their development.

Kathy chose to illustrate Clarissa Scott Delany's poem "Solace". She showed several slides taken at different times of the day at the Audubon Society's sanctuary, others depicting simple joys of boating on the Concord River, watching the sun setting, hiking in the Lincoln woods, and playing her guitar in her own back yard. She concluded with a candid shot, an unrehearsed kiss at her door in the moonlight. She played "Love Is Blue" by Paul Muriat and some other incidental music.

Lori, a talented and artistic senior, produced a seven-minute program about which she said, "My theme is patterns. I want to show how my feelings are expressed by the twelve-tone music I've composed and also by pictures and match-stick designs." Lori had constructed her own slides, producing some remarkable rainbow effects by using food coloring and India ink. She estimated that she had needed about forty hours to compose the music and nearly that much more to do the photography,

create the snowflake designs and to synchronize them to her music, which she called simply, "My Feelings Today." She later repeated her showing for several art classes.

Frank's project was staged in a subway station. Several slides show an unhappy young man leaning against the wall as the trains rumble, rush in, stop, and then streak away into the black void. The youth is next pictured grinning as he holds a stump of black crayon wormed from his pants pocket. As the last train roars off, he screams defiance and scrawls on the freshly painted wall in foot-high letters a well-known four-letter word. Frank explained, "This young man has released his frustration and anger against society with its surface propriety and its taboos. His action I have neither condemned nor condoned, merely illustrated—while the music of Paul Simon is blaring."

LIFE was the theme of the project of Eric and Bruce, who interviewed and photographed twelve seeming-derelicts on Boston Common. They did not question, in the social-worker style, "Why-don't-you-go-to-work?" or "Where-is-your-family?" but the two students politely asked their subjects to discuss current world problems on a man-to-man basis. Most of the interviewees were more than willing to talk, and most were very prejudiced. "We oughta blow all them Commies to hell!" was the theme song of one Common bench-warmer. Eric asked another, a white-haired wreck of a man, for his opinions on Communism. He lashed out with his fists, nearly knocking Bruce's camera out of his hands and shouted, "Damned capitalists ruined me. I ain't talking without you pay me!" Eric felt that his excursion into the shadowy world of the derelicts had been terribly depressing, but "something everybody ought to experience at least once." His music contributed to the effectiveness of the interviews; he used "Ruffles and Flourishes," and then sound effects "Hail to the Chief" and "Political Rally," then more sound effects; and "Life Goes On," followed by excerpts from the sound track of "Zorba, the Greek."

Movies were used by Fred's group to dramatize Alexander Pope's "Ode on Solitude." The sequences showed a lone student reading at a library table; a girl walking through fields and where "trees are yielding shade"; a sleeping child; a solitary hippie crossing a deserted city street; and finally a thoughtful stroller through a neglected cementery, where "no stone tells where I lie." Musical accompaniment was Jeremy Steig's "Lonely Child of Tears", Parts 1 and 2 of "The Sacrifice of the

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Moon" by the Ultimate Spinach, "Rockport Sunday" by Tom Rush, and a flute theme by Charles Lloyd.

I feel Project One was successful although, aside from the progress reports, there was no creative writing. The students exercised their creativity by using graphic and musical media to enhance a theme or develop a mood. They themselves testified in many and diverse ways that they had enjoyed the Project because they were on their own, and they did something *different*. They all worked long hours and the results were uniformly good, though, of course, some were better than others. I graded them on a 10-point scale: originality and imagination, 4; implementation (media used), 3; and smoothness of presentation, 3.

Now that English 103 has exposed the possibilities of non-verbal communication, it is my hope that their literary output will show increased thought, imaginativeness, and accuracy—that, in fact, Project One will have matured and enriched them all a little as writers.